

## Just prices? Challenging values at an organic cooperative in southern Spain

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## **JUST PRICES? CHALLENGING VALUES AT AN ORGANIC COOPERATIVE IN SOUTHERN SPAIN**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper documents the case of La Verde, a producer cooperative in Andalusia, Southern Spain, whose members grow and sell organic fruit and vegetables. Fieldwork data reveals a range of assessments and practices with respect to just price. Historical experiences of working as day laborers, with little access to cash or other resources informs the members' radical political views on money, prices, and markets. These ideas modulate exchanges at the local level, and in their political networks. However, working their own land and selling a prized product allows them to generate good market returns from private shopkeepers in cities. The paper proposes that for a price to be considered just, criteria for commensuration, or equivalence between a price and the perceived value of an object must adhere, but adjudications about this vary according to the relationship between exchangers. Rather than defining an objective just price, the paper considers assessments and judgements about the relation between prices and justice to be contextually defined, contested and negotiated.

[Values, Markets, Commensuration, Organics, Cooperatives, Spain]

## INTRODUCTION

The premise behind this paper is that establishing a just price is a contested and unresolved problem. Rather than define what constitutes a fair price, ethnographic studies of negotiations and struggles over values and practices with respect to transactions reveal a range of orientations and assessments about just prices. The argument rests on the further claim that debates about the just price are the outcome of the intractable difficulty of commensuration; ones' view of a just price depends on the criteria employed to assert, contest, or agree that an amount of money equates to a qualitative value.

To illustrate this argument, I take the case of La Verde, a producer cooperative in southwestern Andalusia whose members grow and sell organic fruit and vegetables. La Verde helps in thinking about just prices because they display inventive and unorthodox livelihood strategies and embody values which generate tensions and contradictions which require negotiation in actually-existing markets. As long-term political activists, their commentaries problematize justice in exchange. At the same time, they pursue values that run counter to dominant economic models and try to realise these alternatives in their exchange relations.

There are a range of possibilities for claiming and contesting commensuration, understood, when considering the just price, as the problem of how the qualities of things, actions, or ideas are justifiably represented by quantities of money (Espeland and Stevens, 1998, p. 315; Grossberg, 2010; Mei, 2009, p. 527; Meikle, 1995, p. 21). Answers to that problem include the formal economic resolution advanced by Marginalist theory, based upon supply and demand as an index of individual preferences (Fourcade, 2011, p. 42; see Introduction, this Volume). In Marginalist economics a just price is both possible and reasonable and it is instantiated in the current market price as this represents equilibrium. For Marginalism, then, a just price rests on objective criteria, as the market itself establishes commensuration (Guyer, 2004, p. 20; Gudeman, 2008; see Introduction, this Volume). While

economic anthropologists may accept this captures important aspects of market exchanges, a substantive frame suggests a just price must also consider social and political relations, and subjective, contextual assessments of those relationships (see Carrier, this Volume). This becomes especially germane in moral economy, in relation to basic commodities and when questions of livelihoods arise (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1993). A just price is mostly marked by its absence, but it is something people define contextually and struggle for in their everyday lives.

Both marginalism and economic anthropology therefore admit the possibility of a just price, while disagreeing about the criteria on which it should be established. A third, and contrary position to both these views would maintain that there is a concealed and unresolvable conceptual gap between quantities and qualities, such that commensuration is a mirage (Meikle, 1995; Stallybrass, 1997; Žižek, 2004, see Introduction to this Volume). That is not to say a resolution cannot be accepted into practice, or imposed and empowered as economic doctrine (Fourcade, 2011).

The conviction that commensuration is unresolvable theoretically, that there is no analytical basis to claim qualities can be reduced to quantities, has repercussions for anthropology and its theory. Non-quantified social and material relations underpin an ideology that favours distance from markets and monetary transactions. This is deeply embedded in Western cultural constructs and the binary pairings often employed in anthropological analyses: gifts and commodities, households and corporations, communities and markets, mutuality and self-interest, the alienable and inalienable (see e.g. Carrier, 1995; Gregory 2009; Gudeman, 1990, 2001, 2008).

A further pairing, production for use and production for exchange, symbolically and to an extent practically encapsulates these oppositions. We can see this in the problematized position of peasants, and anthropological scholarship that emphasizes traditions, communities,

and subsistence production of use values on the one hand, and peasant entanglements in wider market exchange and power relations on the other (see Silverman, 1979).

Negative moral, political, and intellectual assessments of exchange relations predicated on money reinforce these oppositions and essentialisms. In Marx and Simmel, we find a critique of the alienating and abstracting power of money (Dodd, 2014, p. 273; Fourcade, 2011, pp. 41-42; Tsing, 2013, p. 22). In this view, money robs everything of its unique value as a thing. By expressing abstract equivalence, it makes us overlook the quality of objects as the outcome of human creative processes and social relationships (Graeber, 2001). Money, it is supposed, obscures the human relation between people, fetishizes that between people and things, and is an agent of alienation and exploitation (Marx, 1995, pp. 42-50). While many anthropologists have used this analysis to explore fetishism, and class politics and exploitation (see e.g. Taussig 1980, Carrier and Kalb, 2015), others emphasise the social uses of money, and its potential to establish and extend meaningful relationships (e.g. Hart 2000; see Graeber, 2001, p. 66).<sup>i</sup>

Different resolutions to the commensuration problem signalled by money therefore evoke a range of conceptual terms, which can be theoretically separated into oppositions, but this leads to a tendency to essentialize. As James Carrier pointed out for Melanesia, in market practices people ‘maintained a range of relations and invoked different ones in different ways to serve different ends’ (1992, p. 189). As I show, La Verde’s strategies and struggles have embraced a spectrum of resolutions to the commensuration problem. At times, they have engaged successfully in competitive markets and converted their skills and resources into commercial relations, selling commodities at a premium (Tsing, 2013). But their instinct is to shy away from competitive markets and modulate what they consider to be a just price by reference to social and political commitments. At the same moment, a long history of precarity and reliance on non-monetary exchanges evades the problematic relation between justice and

prices; what is more, non-commercial use values inform and prefigure local critiques of money and prices as a reasonable basis for justice in exchange (see Pratt, this Volume).

The paper begins with an ethnographic description of La Verde. The next section documents agendas and experiences in relation to markets and prices; these change over time, but they maintain consistent underlying values. Their convictions include ideas about the non-monetary significance of work, the values attached to production for consumption, and the primacy of social and political relations when realizing commercial exchanges. Such values underpin critical views and guarded approaches to capitalist markets, which reflect Andalusian social and historical experiences. The purpose is to show how their values and strategies engender a range of resolutions to the problem of commensuration and what constitutes a just price.

### **LA VERDE: A POLITICAL PROJECT IN CADIZ PROVINCE, ANDALUSIA**

La Verde was created by young members of the agricultural workers' trade union (*Sindicato de Obreros del Campo*, or SOC) from the town (*pueblo*) of Villamartín in western Andalusia. In 1987, a group of 19 persuaded the water authorities to grant them legal right to cultivate two hectares of scrubland on the flood-plain of the River Guadalete, which runs just to the north of their town.<sup>ii</sup> Emboldened by the transition to democracy, and the resurgence of the left after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, their petition was part of the wider radical and anarchist-informed politics of land occupations and claims in Andalusia that continue to this day (López, 2012).

My own involvement in La Verde began in 2004, when I joined members of the La Ortega producer-consumer cooperative on visits to two farms that supply organic fruit and vegetables to their retail outlet in the city of Seville. After visiting La Verde, we drove to a family owned organic farm about ten miles away, in the foothills of the Sierra de Grazalema.

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At both farms we toured the fields, asked questions about production methods and the farms' histories, and discussed current food issues: permaculture, GM, and the problems faced by small-scale farmers. This was not just a fact-finding mission, it was about establishing and reinforcing social relations between consumers and producers; the idea that economic exchanges should also be based on social relationships is a strong political conviction with long roots in Andalusia.

Since that first visit I have returned to La Verde many times; sleeping there on shorter visits, and working in the fields once or twice a week over several months in 2008.<sup>iii</sup> I have learned how, as is customary for day-laborers (*jornaleros*), the member-workers travel to the farm every day from their homes in town,<sup>iv</sup> bringing *mollete* bread rolls to share at breakfast, and sometimes staying for a communal lunch, but more commonly disappearing home to eat. I spent many days working alongside them and with other volunteers: weeding with the short-handled hoe (*soleta*), planting, harvesting, and preparing fruit and vegetables for market. For a week, I accompanied the drivers of the delivery van, taking produce to Seville, Granada, Cadiz, Jerez, and Puerto de Santa Maria, as well as to schools and old people's homes in towns and villages across Cádiz province.

The focus on La Verde is connected to further areas of research into food provision in Andalusia; attendance at meetings and workshops, interviews with organic retailers and customers, work with local farmers and discussions with consumers on their shopping habits. Out of this research agenda emerges a picture of the values, practices, and contestations attached to food provision, and especially organics, in south western Andalusia.

Over the years La Verde has struggled to maintain a core of member-workers. The group of 19, made up of couples from ten working class families (Gavira, 1989), who made the original petition and began working the land, soon dwindled to ten individuals (Risque, 1990, p. 35). By the time I began visiting, all but two of the seven members were from the



same family. In that respect, the cooperative had taken on characteristics of a small family farm. La Verde can therefore be understood to combine two political and economic traditions in Andalusia: the small peasant or *campesino* farmer and precarious agrarian employment on extensive *latifundia*. (Cobo and Ortega, 2004, p. 1083).

These two strands inform La Verde's actions. First, in accessing land to grow fruit and vegetables, the group were consciously reviving a tradition of kitchen gardens (*huertas*), which had long supplied food to their town. As recently as 1970, there had been over twenty such *huertas* in Villamartín. Manolo, a founder member now in his fifties, recalls his father being a landless kitchen gardener (*hortelano*). *Huertas* have local salience for social reproduction within families, but also in vertical class relations. They link laborers to peasant farmers through association with small-scale intensive horticulture, and to artisans and professionals who consume the products. Local food provision, until the democratic transition of the 1970s and 1980s, accounted for much of the local diet,<sup>v</sup> evoking autonomy and a last recourse in times of hardship and food scarcity.

Small landowners are not part of the social fabric of urban Villamartín, situated as it is among the large estates of the plains (*campiña*). Peasant farmers and smallholders are more prevalent on the peripheries of the towns and villages towards the mountains, which rise a few kilometres to the south. Nevertheless, La Verde shares common ground with small family farmers. Both find attractions in 'traditional' techniques and limit inputs and monetary expenditure in their agricultural systems. When this production is for subsistence it obviates the equivalence of markets; things which are not for sale appeal and are assessed less for their monetary equivalence, and more for their qualities. But La Verde also adopted the *campesino* practice of selling their excess production into local markets, indexing these subsistence-plus exchanges to social and political relations (Gudeman and Rivera, 1990).

In combining subsistence reproduction and surplus, La Verde, in keeping with foundational anthropological debates on peasantries, have one foot in the community, but engage in markets and wider political relations and fields of power (see Silverman, 1979, for a summary). In their case, as we see below, this is best understood within the context of the troubled history of political repression and economic exploitation in Andalusia, which frames their political and ethical understandings of markets, and gives symbolic weight to non-market forms of subsistence.

In parallel, the members La Verde associate themselves with the *jornalero* class of agricultural worker. These workers once eked out a precarious existence through short-term, temporary, or daily migrations away from their home towns to work on large estates. Being surrounded by *latifundia*, urban Villamartín is closely associated with these day-laborer traditions. A notable feature of the *jornalero* class was its well-documented and vociferous political radicalism, in which it found common cause with smallholding peasants and artisans (Brenan, 2000; Cazorla, 2010; Collier, 1987; Corbin, 1993; Espinosa, 2012; Foweraker, 2003; Fraser, 1979; Malefakis, 1970; Martinez-Alier, 1971; Mintz, 1982).

With the growing industrialisation of agriculture from the 1970s, *jornaleros* lost out to machinery and agrochemicals (SOC, 1979). Scarce employment became scarcer and many migrated further afield to work. Today unemployment is chronic. Little remains of the *jornalero* class, except an identity based around historical experiences, and memories of extreme marginality and political and economic repression (Cazorla, 2010; Donaire, 2011; Richards, 1998). Meanwhile, the political radicalism is still evident, but elections show support has dissipated.

The people at La Verde, by contrast, actively sought solutions to the problems of *jornaleros*. First, generating fixed and permanent employment for half a dozen agricultural workers would provide an alternative to unemployment, migration, or reliance on subsidies

under the rural employment plan (Gavira, 1989; Palomo, 1989).<sup>vi</sup> Secondly, they are committed to agroecology. Construed as a politicized form of organics, agroecology is based on an alternative rural model of small-scale agriculture, which La Verde explicitly linked to peasant *campesino* practices (Etchemendi, 1996: 12). In that sense it signals rural development, employment and small-scale agricultural production. As we shall see, agroecology is inspired by and seeks to establish alternative values to profit maximization and the dominant productionist model (Sevilla and Soler, 2010). As Manolo emphasized, they had heard about cases of poisoning of the land and this influenced them in rejecting the agrochemicals that had contributed to the redundancy of *jornaleros*. At the same time, they promote the value of agriculture work, as required by labor-intensive agroecology, and ‘traditional’ methods.

La Verde’s links with leftist politics involves them in a quite different set of horizontal, network-like relationships and agendas to the vertical, class-based connections they maintain in their town. They are known as a beacon for alternative production and ecology and supply organic fruit and vegetables across Western Andalusia, and sometimes further afield. (Etchemendi, 1996). These activities and commitments shape their approaches to markets. They seek to create networks, giving preferential terms and prices to political allies as expressions of solidarity, but are ready to deny responsibility towards those they feel do not deserve that solidarity. Their commentaries are informed by a nuanced understanding of competitive commodity markets and, with certain customers and some of the time, they act more like profit-seeking businesses.

Adherence to an economic model of local food supply and their politics of the left indicate La Verde’s social and cultural roots, but it would be wrong to suggest they are in any way conventional. Since the inception of their project they have been lauded as innovative pioneers. This is repeatedly emphasized in the newspaper reports on their activities passed on to me by Enrique, a founder member. They in many ways defy categorization; they represent

themselves, and are represented by journalists, as ‘day-laborers’, ‘peasants without land’, as ‘entrepreneurs’, ‘audacious’, and ‘impresarios’, and yet as ‘militant’ ‘alternatives’ who do not want to be written off as a ‘weird commune’ (Gavira, 1989; Palomo, 1989).

Being innovative and inspired, the activists from SOC soon consolidated and expanded the La Verde project. Within a couple of years, they successfully petitioned for a further four hectares of land. Soon after, they purchased five hectares on the same site. By the early 1990s, they somewhat reluctantly legally inscribed La Verde as a cooperative, the first to produce organic fruit and vegetables in Spain (Gomez, 2001). Officially constituted as a *sociedad cooperativa andaluz*, they could access grants and subsidies, and engage more effectively with the state, civil society, and markets. They were wary, however, of mainstream ideas and politics. One reason for this, as Manolo explained in interview, was that many cooperatives locally had failed, and they had a reputation for malpractice and corruption.

The workers began by producing food to eat and reinvesting any profits from local sales into clearing the land, renovating buildings, and installing irrigation systems. By the 1990s they were increasingly involved in supplying organic food to groups of consumers in provincial towns and cities. They were instrumental in setting up producer-consumer groups (Grasseni, 2013), such as La Ortiga in Seville, became a point of reference in agroecology networks, and were consulted on agrarian policy (Etchemendi, 1996). By the time of my main fieldwork in 2008, La Verde had instigated an alliance with other small producers, pooling supplies of organic fruit and vegetables for distribution across Andalusia. For a few years, this second level cooperative, Pueblos Blancos, supplied box schemes, consumer cooperatives, schools and other institutions, as well as private shops with organic produce. However, difficulties of collaboration between members with different agendas and priorities, and insolvency, led to the dissolution of Pueblos Blancos by 2013.

The case of La Verde encapsulates and exemplifies the values and practices behind alternative food provision in Andalusia. More importantly, for this paper, their testimonies with respect to exchange provide vivid illustrations of the problem of commensuration, different routes to confronting that problem, and the politics and ethics of just prices. There is a sharp political edge to their negotiation of shifting value frames in economic relations. The account shows how La Verde vacillate between worlds in which use value and subsistence are emphasized, to one in which exchanges, money, and markets come to predominate. Between these two is a complex world of social relations and social obligations, in which much of the discussion of just and unjust prices plays out.

### **LA VERDE: VALUES AND JUST PRICES**

This part of the paper documents transactions at La Verde and the value judgements in which they are entangled. I begin by showing how the project is embedded in non-monetary values that are more concerned with personal freedom and interactions with non-commodified nature. Where these values concern relations between people or people to things, there is an implicit critique of the debasement of abstract money; the qualities of things seem to trump monetary value and deny commensurability. However, in producing for sale, the members also participate in exchange relations using money. Sometimes these are construed more like gifting relations with social and political obligation attached, and at times they shade into the relations anthropologists associate with alienated commodities (Carrier, 1995; Thomas, 1991; Tsing 2013).

#### ***Worlds without Money?***

Coming from a rural world of scarcity, the motive for La Verde's petition for land was in the first instance to grow food for themselves, friends, and families. Following local provisioning, production was for consumption in *huertas*, supplemented by non-market practices such as

foraging. In the words of Manuela, a middle-aged founder-member I often worked with at La Verde, ‘we wanted to prove it is possible to live from the land...our cooperative is a *huerta* with products that we eat’. In that respect, they resemble a ‘back-to-the-land’ movement, geared to self-provisioning (Risquez, 1990) but with a working-class background in a context where precarity and memories of famine resonate.

As I have said, access to food from a *huerta* is associated with peasant economy and is dependent on having cultivable land. Landless day laborers do not have that, unless they establish contracts with landlords (Narotzky and Smith, 2006, p. 77). One non-market option for the landless, or anyone wishing to vary their diet, is foraging from the countryside. Enrique, the driver of the delivery van recalled his childhood: ‘we were always in the countryside. We knew the things we could collect to eat. There was not much choice of employment’. Foraging today still yields mushrooms, snails, wild asparagus, prickly pears and the thistle-like *tagarninas*, a key ingredient of chickpea stew. From abandoned farms or the edges of property, oranges, almonds and pomegranates can be appropriated. One elderly woman I sorted onions with on her family farm, recalled her fear of starving workers roaming the countryside and stealing crops from the smallholding. As essentially non-market and non-monetary activities, these forms of appropriation directly from nature hold historical importance for survival.

Foraged foods do, of course, have market value, and their salience has shifted over the years, but it is not common to see them for sale, and there are strategies to divest these things of their commodity status. For example, it is common for people to set up temporary stalls outside local markets to sell prickly pears (*higos chumbos*).<sup>vii</sup> They are presented ready-peeled in a plastic bag. Effectively one is paying for the perilous work of removing the spines, rather than the fruit itself, which can be easily and readily picked from the countryside.

In other cases, more elaborate strategies are required to deny foraged things their full commodity potential (Appadurai, 1986). For example, people collect large bunches of highly-

prized wild asparagus and hawk them in town. However, rather than sell them, the forager may organize a raffle. As one commentator complained: ‘they go around the bars with their five-euro tickets, taking advantage of us when we are drunk!’ This practice may mean a higher return for the organizer of the draw, but the transaction is predicated on luck, and so avoids establishing a market price for something that has cost ‘nothing’. The picker needs good fortune to find the asparagus (as well as time, skill, and knowledge of their possible location), the participant in the raffle requires luck to secure the reward, but there is no price set, by supply or demand or any other criteria. In this way the commodification of the asparagus is effaced.

The ability and necessity to produce and forage food to eat implies autarky, or independence from market exchange, and this continues to inform life at La Verde. Workers often sit down and share meals based on food grown on site. As one Spanish volunteer commented, ‘there are not many places where you can go out and collect your food and make an entire meal’. After a day’s work at the cooperative, fieldworkers also take food home. As a father of four children, I was particularly encouraged to help myself to fruit and vegetables, ‘for the family’.

The possibility of growing food led La Verde towards agroecology; they were, after all, mimicking traditional practices, were responding as trade-unionists to the industrialisation of agriculture, and had health concerns. As Manuela explained, from the start they were concerned about the qualities of the things they were eating: ‘we worked ecologically because we were going to eat the food ourselves. We didn’t want chemicals, we wanted to eat healthy things’.

Agroecology means rejecting the prevailing and increasingly dominant capitalist model of agriculture. Manolo revealed how they had heard about local cases of pesticide pollution and this influenced them. Creating a sustainable environment involved planting beneficial trees (and removing eucalyptus), allowing weeds and insects to thrive (‘we call it ecological

infrastructure'), and making compost or reaching agreement with local goat herders to allow grazing on the land. It also denies the primacy of monetary value. As Enrique once argued:

When we speak about sustainable agriculture we shouldn't just speak about inputs. If you arrive in a place, say 10 hectares, with 40 million pesetas, and set the thing up it is bound to work. But if you have nothing and all you put in over the years is your energy, your hands, your imagination, and little by little you invest part of your income, then for us that is sustainable agriculture, because of the tremendous work you have put in.

In this we see that as an alternative, agroecology implies a non-commodified conceptualization of work. This is reinforced in emphasizing the process of learning. The fundamental importance of education is described by Manuela:

I don't want to be just a worker at the cooperative. I could work elsewhere and make more money. I like my job because I like the work, because I don't have a boss telling me what to do and because I learn something new every day. Sharing with people who visit is really interesting. I have lost count of the projects we have set up and the visitors we have had. Obviously, we have taught lots of people, but we have learned as much as we have taught.

Enrique makes a similar point but gives it broader significance as self-determination and self-realisation:

This is a project about how we want to live. For us, agroecology is not about putting ourselves in the hands of others. For us it is about liberating people. To free ourselves is a life project.



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Anarchist principles of personal autonomy informs practices and social relations in the work place. Agroecology, with its 'ecological infrastructure' and fallow land, precludes intensive production to maximize profits. I have met small farmers who disparage the scale of production, the weeds, and the semi-abandoned aesthetic and disorganized air at La Verde. By conventional standards La Verde is inefficient. One farmer pointed out that industrial-scale tomato growers in the area would consider La Verde's volume of production 'laughable'. This, however, is to misconstrue their purpose to supply food for themselves and their networks. They place emphasis on qualities rather than quantities, mixed agriculture and availability of produce over the arc of the agricultural seasons, rather than maximising output.

The refusal to prioritise profits and efficiency informs working practices. There is no foreman and there are no set roles or duties. Volunteers are invited to participate in activities, but often left to their own devices, or to do nothing. People begin one task and then stop to chat or wander off without explanation. The contrast with Taylorist and Fordist principles of capitalist production and control are stark. The members emphasize the sharing and purposeful rotation of tasks, which creates and reproduces the horizontal social relations that underlie their political ethos (Palomo, 1989; Risquez, 1990).

It also reinforces La Verde's status as an education project, rather than an agricultural one geared to market profit. They have run courses for unemployed youth, been involved in drug rehabilitation programmes, organize workshops, and are consulted on policy. I have no record of the recompense for these activities; as money is never mentioned there appears to be no just monetary price for these services. In the same way, the volunteers who come to work receive only board and lodging. They are students or people interested in agroecology who come to learn and it is construed as an educational exchange, rather than a financial one.

Production for consumption, foraging, agroecology, and horizontal work relations imply non-market values of autarky and independence. This provides one answer to the

problem of commensuration; denying and contradicting scales of value constituted through the abstracting and alienating power of money. The conceptual gap between quality and quantity was revealed to me one day as I was driving down a dirt track with Daniel, a smallholder and agronomist in his forties.

On seeing a neighbouring farmer, Daniel stopped for onions. The farmer filled a sack with ‘five euros worth’ of his crop, going by number or estimating the weight, adding a few extra, but using some unclear rule of thumb. We drove off, but Daniel did not pay. Laughing, he told his neighbour he had no money and would settle up later. When I asked if he got a good deal compared to supermarket prices, he replied: ‘there is no comparison, these onions are fantastic, they are sweet and succulent’, repeating and emphasizing ‘there is no comparison’. I never discovered if he paid his neighbour, but this is to miss the point of an encounter in which money value is downplayed or ignored, and the quality of the onions and the social relation effaces monetary comparison. Being ‘beyond comparison’, neither is there much recourse to a just price. Rather, value derives from the quality of things and relationships in which they are embedded.

Thus far I have shown that La Verde is inspired and operates by values that ostensibly lie outside monetary relations. At least, their concerns as smallholders are to subsist and reproduce through practices that exist outside or deny money value. However, La Verde do not just grow food for subsistence or for sharing outside monetary circuits, they also produce for market exchange, and this involves considerations of prices. I now turn to their negotiation of markets, showing how they try to realize a vision of transactions that meet their social relationships and political ambitions. However, these exchanges have potential to shade off into alienated commodity relations.

### ***To Market, To Market***

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The values identified above are overtly moral and political. They may reinforce each other, or they may contradict one another, but they are not easily measurable in money, and so appear incommensurable with economic scales, or commodity regimes of value (Aspers and Beckert, 2011, pp. 5-8; Appadurai 1986). Nevertheless, moral values do have bearing on economic practices (Aspers and Beckert, 2011, p. 6). In the remainder of this section I explore correlations and contradictions between La Verde's politics and their economic activities, first in relation to work and then with respect to agroecology and organics. As moral and political values pertaining to these arenas intersect with social relations and obligations, but also with more alienated commodity relations, so 'collaborations' and 'frictions' are generated (Tsing, 2005). In trying to commensurate their politics with economic activities, discourses and strategies on just prices are revealed.

We have seen how, by one account, production at La Verde provides food to eat. However, the goal is not autarky; they do not renounce market exchange. Quite the contrary, La Verde is better described as a project for autonomy in which they try to dictate the terms and conditions of both work and engagement in market exchange. Their desire for autonomy at work is no doubt a response to their experiences of exploitation as day laborers, but their attitudes and strategies in markets are informed by the novel (for them) set of circumstances of horticultural production for exchange. The departure point for market engagement was the local economy of smallholders supplying food into their town; what the reporter Risquez (1990) at the time called 'town-country symbiosis'. La Verde are notable for combining this model with their politicized and left-wing horizontal networks.

While producing food to eat, the members of La Verde in the early days continued to work as day laborers, completing the *peonadas* that gave them an income and entitled them to subsidies under the new government rural employment plan (Risquez, 1990: 35). While from the beginning, as we shall see, La Verde did generate cash from sales, this was primarily

reinvested in the project. The members ‘paid themselves’ with the products they grew (Ruiz, 1990). Their idea, however, was to create permanent and secure waged employment as workers, and they began in 1989 to take a nominal ‘quota’ of 1000 pesetas<sup>viii</sup> (Risque, 1990: 35). In creating fixed, regular employment they hoped to escape the chronic underemployment and precarious conditions of the Andalusian *jornalero*, circumstances that were particularly bad for people like them with a reputation as political agitators.<sup>ix</sup>

More importantly, creating secure employment in the cooperative allowed them to transpose into the workplace their ideas about personal autonomy, the value of work, and horizontal politics. As Manolo, a founder member, explained to me:

‘we could pay ourselves different amounts as we do different tasks, but we decided to give each other the same minimum wage of 800 euros a month, out of solidarity’.<sup>x</sup>

Rather than indexing wages to profits, they set the just price for labor according to a legally and socially recognized minimum salary to meet basic needs. Granting themselves a guaranteed and ‘just’ salary allows them to realize their project of personal and group autonomy, precisely what is denied by the *jornalero* system.

Similarly, La Verde’s political conception of just prices is transposed into their principal market activity; the production of organic fruit and vegetables for sale. How, then, do La Verde deal with prices set by markets? Their main strategy is to stay outside mainstream circuits and retain control. They have done this not to maximize profit, but to shape markets in line with their political vision and to retain autonomy.

Production for consumption was the founding principle, but La Verde soon found themselves producing a surplus. Manolo, talking of the cow they once had, explained that ‘they couldn’t drink all the milk because a cow can produce up to 25 litres a day; the problem we had is that ours produced 30-35 litres, a really good cow!’ With surplus, in the words of

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Manuela, ‘we began to think about how to open up a market’. They began with gifting, but soon found this shaded into more commodity-like relations as they sold surplus to shops.

Manuela explains:

when we had our first harvest of beans we took the odd box to the shops here in the *pueblo*, or when we had a good harvest we would share it between our extended families...but we were surprised because production was greater than the shops could sell on the streets’.

As La Verde became increasingly entangled in market exchanges they learned to negotiate through and around different markets, achieving a range of commensurations that they could more or less reconcile with their politics. Entering markets oriented towards maximizing profit raises problems as it often conflicts with their political convictions. In determining a just price, they consider not only the market price they could command, but also social and political relations and contexts. The rest of this section explores the complex political economy of their market engagement and how they negotiate and at times manipulate commensurations in line with their political ideology.

Two main factors inform their approach to markets. First, they had negative experiences with intermediaries, who they felt were profiteering and threatening their autonomy. Second, organics, and especially their more stringent interpretation, provided a wider market for their products that allowed them to dictate terms of supply and prices, while leading them at times into market relations that required careful handling.

The first lesson they learned about markets came when they had such a surplus of green beans that they could not eat them all or sell them themselves in town. Manuela picks up the story:

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There is a wholesaler in Bornos [a nearby town] and he took the beans for a really cheap price. What a surprise when we went to the shops in our town a few days later and saw our beans. The shopkeeper confirmed that the wholesaler had supplied them, and they were triple the price we had sold them for!

This experience led La Verde to avoid wholesalers. Manuela continued:

So, we said, “that’s it, you will never again make money from our beans. We will feed them to our pigs rather than let you make money at our expense”. We would never sell again through a wholesaler because the wholesaler is the only person who profits. The shopkeeper loses, the consumer loses, and above all the farmer loses.

The concern that intermediaries are prejudicial to achieving just prices has in recent years entered mainstream discourse. While La Verde’s concern is with wholesalers, there has been a shift towards blaming retailers and major supermarkets who pay farmers at below production costs. In Andalusia, there are regular demonstrations by horticulturalists, and the media reports on the excess profits made by intermediaries and the difficulties faced by fruit and vegetable producers. Differences between farm gate prices and retail prices of over a thousand percent are used to illustrate unjust prices.<sup>xi</sup> While this may not show profits, as it provides no account of costs, there is a general perception that in transferring food from producer to consumer unjust profits are made by wholesalers, retailers, or other intermediaries. One of the claims made by La Verde, and other direct sellers, is that by avoiding intermediaries they circumvent unjust profit-making.

At La Verde, their agroecological methods add a further dynamic, introducing a novel set of market relations and opportunities to negotiate. As Manuela recalls, no one in their town understood the concept of organics: ‘we were four silly kids and we what is more we were

organic, “what is that”? To negotiate this problem, they followed the *huerta* tradition, and began selling their products in their town. Manuela explains:

In the beginning people did not buy our products because they were organic, they bought them because they were fresh and from here, cut in the morning and sold in the afternoon. But over time people began to understand that organic products were good for your health. That began with [middle class] people like teachers and doctors. The ordinary people just bought it because it was fresh.

Over the years, La Verde has seen the market for organics grow and diversify. This has presented them with a conundrum. Demand has provided opportunities to supply wholesalers and private shops with certified organic produce. But they give these outlets low priority and they are quick to retract trade with them. As I now show, they are not very concerned to maximize returns from formal economic relations. Rather, they are more interested in commitment to political allies and localized food provision.

An experience, related by Manolo, illustrates their wariness of trade in organics that reproduces mainstream forms of distribution. His story begins with a French wholesaler appearing at La Verde looking to buy organic strawberries. The next year they planted a hectare and supplied them to Parisian shops, receiving letters of appreciation in return. However, they had entered a world they were not comfortable with: ‘above all, exporting made us dependent. The economic results were good, but it was fragile because we began to lose the strategy of the local market’. Implicit in this idea of local market is their ability to control sales and index prices in relation to the social and political relationship in which the transaction takes place.

As sons and daughters of *jornaleros*, who have been active in the trade union movement, they were equally concerned with just wages and conditions of labor in competitive markets:

We began to realize we were getting into a dangerous situation. In particular, it led to problems with personnel, working with non-members [of La Verde]. Not because they were not members, but because they were friends and family. It required living in that hard, economic world, and having a business-like attitude. That has always been really difficult for us. We had conflicts in relations and we stopped all that.

A similar problem concerns determining a just price for their products, especially in a context of competition from industrialized agriculture with economies of scale, which have entered and ‘conventionalized’ the organic sector, driving down standards, costs and prices (Guthman, 2004; Pratt, 2009). Enrique cited the example of a carrot farmer in Medina Sidonia who works 160 hectares using migrant east European female labor, saying ‘we can’t compete with that.’

As organic agriculture has become more mainstream, so La Verde cooperative have remained committed to agroecology, but sceptical about conventional organics (Vankeerberghen 2012). Manolo’s comment illustrates:

Personally, I am not in organics for a certification system that operates under shit rules modified to support the productionist sector. They accept dubious practices because of that, or they certify products that come from thousands of miles away.

As we saw in the case of the Parisian strawberries, when they do deal with more conventional channels of distribution they do so with little enthusiasm or commitment. I spent one morning preparing leeks for sale to a national organic wholesaler. When I pointed out most of the leeks had gone to seed and were not worth selling, my objection was brushed aside. I took this as evidence they had little commitment to generating a longer-term commercial



relation. Rather than building trust or social relationships they focussed on selling for profit in the short-term (Bloch and Parry, 1989, p. 2)

Enrique emphasizes a related problem with the productionist sector and dominant economic models: food miles.

Food has to travel, I know. Globalization means a complicated world, but what is not normal is that you can grow an apple here in the *huerta*, and they have to bring apples from Argentina. That is the strange globalized world we live in, but for us it is not development and it is not sustainable.

Rather than try to compete in a world where a just price is determined by the lowest point at which global supply is commensurate with demand, La Verde have tried to find their own solutions to competitive markets. For example, Manolo talked of their need to raise capital to buy a replacement tractor arm for 300,000 pesetas. They tried banks, ‘but the bank manager was rude, he doubted we were even a cooperative. We saw the terms and conditions and said: “we’re out of here”. 21 percent when the going rate was 17 percent!’.

Instead they have raised money by ‘crowd-funding’. Enrique describes this as ‘earning money for ourselves’. An example is the cow, mentioned by Manolo earlier:

Take the example of the first cow... We made an agreement with some friends from the *pueblo* to get the money to buy the cow. It cost 90,000 pesetas and the consumers gave us the money. We consumed the milk we needed and paid the 90,000 back in milk.

Manuela explained how they wanted ‘the people who live near them to be the ones to benefit from eating our products’. According to one report, after five years of operation La Verde were still selling 90% of their produce in their *pueblo* (Montero, 1993). The model was later transposed into the alliance they made with small family farmers; the Pueblos Blancos

cooperative included in its mission statement ‘the establishment of short commercial circuits’ (*circuitos cortos de comercialización*).

On the farm or to local shops, they sell organic food at prices competitive with conventional products (Montero, 1993). Indeed, when selling from the *huerta* to local customers in town, the organic label can be counterproductive as the products are considered elite and expensive, associated with rich, urban, middle-class consumers (Montero, 1993). For example, I attended a series of workshops designed to promote organic produce in the small towns of the Sierra de Cádiz.<sup>xiii</sup> The organizers presented a list of products and their prices, comparing organic with conventional products. Although the evidence showed little difference in most cases, the participants I spoke to were unconvinced, insisting organic products were exclusive and for the affluent.

To counteract this (mis)conception with clientele in their towns, organic producers both sell at prices that compete with conventional products and play down their organic certification. Antonio, a small producer of organic certified fruit and vegetables in the hills above Villamartín, runs a market stall in a town a few miles away. When I asked him why he does not advertise his organic status he said: ‘I don’t need to do that. I don’t like to publicize it. People know who I am and what I sell’. A reasonable price in this context is constituted around the knowledge it is local and fresh, and sold at a competitive rate compared to conventional produce.

A rather different set of circumstances and tactics prevail in sales into the cities. Preferential discounts are given to the urban producer-consumer cooperatives, who share La Verde’s political vision, and whose members are mainly left-wing public-sector functionaries and students. I went, for example, on a six-hour round trip across Andalusia with a special delivery of a few boxes of fruit and vegetables requested by a producer-consumer association. This action makes sense in social and political, but not in economic terms. Another group, I

heard described as their ‘first customers’, are participants in box schemes. They are likewise given preference in products and pricing; the superior variety and quality of the products delivered to this group compared to private shops was notable.

By contrast, La Verde charge a ‘market rate’ when they sell to private specialist shops in the cities. These shops do not have the same political vision as La Verde, they have a primarily middle-class, professional clientele, who worry about their health or are concerned about pesticides in food they give to their children. One organic shopkeeper had been a buyer for a large department store. She told me she would just as happily sell shoes as organic products. One of the complaints she raised was that she could not persuade La Verde to deliver decent products to her on a regular basis. The woman was looking for a commercial relationship, but La Verde have little in common with approaches to business based purely on market principles and give such retailers low priority in pricing and distribution.

In another case, at a meeting, I heard members of La Verde propose cutting supplies to a retailer who had fallen behind in his payments to Pueblos Blancos. This was surprising as the shopkeeper in question shared their politics, visited them on their farm often, and was also a producer of citrus. Boxes of his organic oranges were sometimes delivered to La Verde for workers’ consumption. While difficult to account for in political terms, La Verde were not beyond acting out of economic expediency. Pueblos Blancos were themselves at this time behind in payments to farmers, and eventually became bankrupt. They were not prepared to carry the debt of the shopkeeper, despite recognising close political affinities with him.

La Verde, and their experiments and experiences with markets and exchanges of various kinds, illustrates the bearing the problem of commensuration has on understanding just prices. Conceptions of what makes a price just are predicated on shifting political and ethical criteria, and varying evaluations of what makes a price commensurate with the value of the object are filtered through assessments of the relation between exchangers. In that respect, La

Verde uphold political principles, but these sometimes slip into more commercial values. There is no hard and fast separation between gifting and commodity relations (Tsing, 2013), rather there is a process by which things look more gift like at certain points but sometimes assume the alienated commodity form (Frow, 1997, p. 124).

It could be argued that La Verde have established a niche market in which, though they do not hold monopoly, they are a major player. That market comprises mostly professional, middle-class, urban dwellers – teachers and doctors and students – of left-wing persuasion. Sensitive to political history, often involved in politics themselves, these are people who know about and are drawn to the La Verde initiative and agroecology. They are less persuaded by the kind of conventionalised organics identified above. This explains Enrique's comment on the appeal of La Verde:

It is strange, though, that after 21 years we have never used the name of La Verde like a label. We use our prestige as a human group to sell. We don't rely on organic labelling with an inspector who checks for residues and inputs.

Their ability to use their renown as a group to sell to a specific clientele in the cities, relies on a shared politics and historical experience. In the final section, I show how to understand La Verde's attitudes and actions with regard to markets and prices requires exploration of the broader social and historical background in which they are entangled.

### **THE ANDALUSIAN CONTEXT**

The troubled economic and political history of Cádiz Province makes fertile ground for data collection on the topic of money and just prices. The area has historical experiences of extreme deprivation that are hard to imagine in Europe, and this colours practices and views on money, exchange, and justice.

Andalusia's history of partisan conflict and violence is extreme. Notably, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the political left rejected the established order in sometimes violent ways. At the same time, they engaged in imaginative experiments, proposing collectivized land ownership and the abolition of money. The radical programme was then met with even greater violence as nationalist forces under Franco and the Falange took control in the late 1930s, ushering in fierce repression that lasted until the uneasy transition to democracy in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>xiii</sup>

Experiences of economic marginality and political conflict have bearing on the economic imaginary, material practices, and convictions about exchange. Extreme poverty and exploitative labor relations engendered a political culture that entailed the rejection of capitalism as a basis for justice.<sup>xiv</sup> In its place, there is a long history of claims to collectivized land ownership (*reparto*) and struggles over minimum working conditions and pay. Insecure employment that depended on the whim of landlords, incited an anarchist ideology of personal autonomy. When dependency on employers is replaced by reliance on the welfare state, this can provoke similar reactions. Manolo pointed out how state subsidies was a well thought out system that 'legalised and normalised marginality, taking away your willpower'. La Verde 'wanted to do something more than justify claiming subsidies' (Risquez, 1990, p. 36, my translation).

Alongside this political culture, there is a parallel history of local food provision through dense social networks. Despite relative affluence today, this economy still resonates, and is central to local diet. There is a profound commitment to an economy of social reproduction realised through extended family and friendships; the *pueblos* are imagined and to a degree remain autonomous and self-contained. Money plays a varied and variable role in mediating these relations. Sometimes it is absent. At other moments payments and price scales are filtered through social relations, such as when differential rents for property are charged to

family and friends compared to tourists or outsiders. In the latter case a maximizing market rate is considered appropriate.

In Spain, society and economy appear rather as a set the of Russian dolls; the autonomous individual is nested within the domestic family, which is then immersed in wider social relations of extended kin, friendships and alliances, in the town and beyond. These persons, families, and towns are in turn located within municipalities, provinces, and regions. A somewhat forced and fragile national unity is cross-cut by regionalism (Narotzky and Smith, 2006: 22), which is further complicated by political and class interests; for Gerald Brenan, ‘the country was split, both vertically and horizontally, into a number of mutually antagonistic factions’ (2000, p. 229).

Multiple and overlapping, yet contested, the political and economic relations I have sketched implies a just price that is indexed at least partly to the nature of the social relation between the exchangers. In Spain, as in my fieldwork site, ideas about a just price are the outcome of a specific constellation of ethics and politics. By way of conclusion, I return to the question of how more localised and regional ideas about just prices are framed within wider intellectual discussions on the problem of commensuration and pricing.

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to what many economists would have us believe, there are different and contested responses to the problem of (in)commensuration – the paradox of how different qualities are reduced to quantities and so can be compared. The underlying problem, which concerns ratio, was first entertained by Aristotle and became central to discussions of the just price (see Introduction, this Volume). The modern answer, as Tocqueville pointed out long ago with respect to democracy, requires an ‘imaginary equality’ between persons (Handler, 2009, pp. 640-641) whose decisions about purchasing set in motion the invisible hand of the market. In

this formulation, simply exchanging money for goods becomes an act of commensuration, as an acknowledgement of equivalence.

Money as a medium for human agency is a foundational tenet of neo-classical economics and modern thought, yet the evidence in this chapter suggests that the commensuration that money enacts is contingent. What is more, I would argue, an anthropology that entertains a politics of value, and considers money, needs to engage with contests over commensuration; that is, the political processes by which equivalence is established, enforced, or rejected as inappropriate. By entertaining different possibilities, we can hope to move beyond what Keith Hart identifies as the normative and binary depiction of money as a force for good or evil (2000). This alternative view presupposes that a politics and ethics of just prices needs to be studied within specific contexts.

The Introduction to this volume documents a spectrum of responses to the problem of just prices, as these have played out in political and economic ideas. There are aspects of economy that deny any commensuration is possible, in which case a just price is also logically impossible. Here exchanges are not so much counted, and emphasis is on use and qualities, which in food would refer to such things as taste and sustenance. Another form of economy says rates of exchange and so a just price should depend on social positioning and relationships. Here a rough kind of commensuration is possible, but it is modulated by need, or familiarity, or political convictions. Finally, economists and advocates of the free market claim commensuration is best indexed by supply and demand and the just price is simply achieved by aggregating the subjective decisions of autonomous economic agents.

What I wish to suggest in this paper is that commensuration is more of an idea or a principle than a concrete fact, and like any idea it has different and shifting facets. It is perhaps better to speak about the uses of commensuration (Handler, 2009), to document those different

uses, and relate them to political and ethical contestations over the terms for constituting a just price.

### NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> In recent years debates have polarized somewhat, between those who propose and pursue an anthropology of morality and ethics, and those who maintain a more overtly political focus (see Kapferer and Gold, 2018).

<sup>ii</sup> The land was under the administration of the *Confederación Hidrográfica del Guadalquivir*. The Guadalquivir is a major Spanish river of which the Guadalete is a tributary. It is unclear whether payment was made to cede the land as a legal concession, or rented (*arrendado*) as a tenant. In any case, it seems likely that rent was peppercorn or unpaid, since it does not figure in financial accounts.

<sup>iii</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the generous support from the Economic and Social Research Council.

<sup>iv</sup> These range from villages of around 2000 people, up to larger urban conurbations with as many as 25,000 inhabitants.

<sup>v</sup> Bread, meat, eggs, oil, fruit and vegetables were, and still often are locally produced and processed. Only coffee and fish had to be imported.

<sup>vi</sup> First introduced in 1986 by the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) under Felipe González, the *Plan de Empleo Rural* gave fixed term welfare payments in return for a specified number of days worked (*peonadas*).

<sup>vii</sup> Every town has a covered market place, or *plaza de abastos* where traders rent stalls.

<sup>viii</sup> In 1990, one thousand pesetas was worth just over £UK 5, or about £UK 12 in today's money.

<sup>ix</sup> Manolo once described to me experiences as a *jornalero*. Common practice was to gather in the town square and wait to be chosen by employers or their foremen. Political agitators would be ignored and faced penury while passive workers would secure the work and wages. In this way contracts were politicized and the compliance of 'dull economic compulsion' was enforced.

<sup>x</sup> The minimum legal salary (*Salario Mínimo Interprofesional*) in Spain is set by the Ministry of Employment and Social Security and in 2017 was set at 825.60 euros per month.

<sup>xi</sup> A report on the Andalusian day-time regional news on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2018 focussed on farmers' protests at squeezed livelihoods. Footage showed mark-ups in prices for five products, ranging from 1,067% for peaches, to 606% for melons.

<sup>xii</sup> Organized and run by the Rural University Paolo Freire (*Universidad Rural Paolo Freire*).

<sup>xiii</sup> Cazorla estimates that four 'reds' were killed for every nationalist (2010: 19-20)

<sup>xiv</sup> For example, Diaz de Moral tells us that 71 out of 75 municipalities in the Province of Cordoba took part in the general strike of 1902-1905 under the anarcho-syndicalist banner of 'libertarian communism' (cited in Brenan 2000: 179, n. 2).

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